

# The Saudi Deal Shows Just How Broken the US Arms Export Process Has Become

A. Trevor Thrall

May 25, 2017

**The Trump administration made headlines last week** when it announced a \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia, signed with pomp and circumstance during the president's first international trip. But even though Donald Trump's team was thrilled, this record-setting deal is in fact another sign that the American arms sales process is broken.

At the most fundamental level, the process by which the executive branch determines the security implications of arms sales has become a sham. The process, led by the Pentagon and dictated by the **Arms Export Control Act**, is designed to ensure that every arms deal furthers U.S. national security and does not amplify conflicts, instability, or human rights abuses elsewhere. But increasingly since the end of the Cold War, and **especially since 9/11**, U.S. arms sales have upset regional balances of power, provided our adversaries with weapons, enabled violence, and contributed to ongoing human rights abuses.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, even a cursory geostrategic review should have led the Pentagon to advise against Trump's deal. Most obviously, the deal will provide Saudi Arabia with advanced weapons to use in its war in Yemen, where it has been accused of deliberately bombing civilian areas and committing other **war crimes**, helping to create what the United Nations calls the "**largest humanitarian crisis**" in the world. Beyond that, any major weapons sale to the Middle East – already in turmoil and driven by civil and sectarian conflict – risks further destabilizing the region. This deal may encourage the Kingdom to favor military solutions to its problems, will almost certainly heighten tensions with Israel, and poses a real risk of igniting an arms race with Iran. These are precisely the conditions that the Arms Export Control Act identifies as reasons to reject arms sales requests.

Unfortunately, the Saudi deal is simply one instance in a long historical pattern of failures to realistically assess the risks. As a result, many such deals have created serious downstream problems. Under President George W. Bush, for example, the United States transferred **vast quantities** of infantry weapons to Iraq, most of which went missing and many of which **wound up** in the hands of the Islamic State. President Obama's plan to train and equip Syrian rebels not only failed to produce meaningful results but similarly ended up with the Islamic State getting its hands on those weapons too. And even before the Saudi deal, the Trump administration announced plans to sell attack aircraft **to Nigeria** and machine guns **to Tunisia**, despite the chaotic conditions in both countries and the obvious potential for those weapons to be misused by governments with terrible human-rights records. This track record makes it difficult to believe that the Pentagon conducts any serious review of these deals whatsoever.

In theory, the Arms Export Control Act gives Congress the power to restrain an imprudent executive branch from making bad arms deals. In reality, however, lawmakers have rarely proven willing or able to stop even the most dangerous sales. To his credit, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, will **soon offer** legislation in an attempt to block the Saudi deal, and others like Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Connecticut, have **blasted** it publicly. But history suggests that their efforts will be fruitless. Last November, a resolution by Sens. Murphy; Paul; Mike Lee, R-Utah; and Al Franken, D-Minn., to block the sale of Abrams tanks to Saudi Arabia was **defeated**, 71-27. The last time Congress actually stopped a sale of any kind, in fact, was **in the early 1990s**.

Today we have a White House obsessed with making deals, a Pentagon that doesn't provide wise counsel to its political masters, and a Congress that has abdicated responsibility for checking the executive branch. Leaders in Washington must recommit themselves to a more honest and realistic process for assessing the implications of Trump's arms deals. America's interest in global security far outweighs its interest in making a few billion dollars.

*A. Trevor Thrall is a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy at the Cato Institute and associate professor in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University.*